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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8759
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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1886
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 1465
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0428
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2298
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1683
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO BRUSSELS BE
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RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BISHKEK 001795

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SUBJECT: PROGRESS FOR KYRGYZ HAJJ PILGRIMS

BISHKEK 00001795 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Amb. Marie L. Yovanovitch, Reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (SBU) Summary: The first planeload of Kyrgyz pilgrims has taken off for Mecca, but the mismanagement of the last Hajj is still fresh in the minds of the Muslim community throughout Kyrgyzstan, with some calling for the Chief Mufti and state officials to resign. Following the January 2006 Hajj fiasco, in which more than 2000 who had paid were unable to go because the quota was oversold, and other pilgrims who did go were left stranded due to visa problems and bus breakdowns, responsibility for managing logistics for this Hajj was shifted from the official Muslim clergy to the State Agency for Religious Affairs (SARA). SARA Director Jorobekov told Poloff that all 4500 Kyrgyz pilgrims would make the journey by plane, and that those cheated out of the last trip would be "first on the list" this time; he said he expected arrangements to be "problem-free." Jorobekov also dismissed calls for his resignation and for the resignation of the Mufti on charges of mismanagement and corruption. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Poor arrangements for the January 2006 Hajj prompted charges of corruption and mismanagement against the official Muslim clergy and Chief Mufti Maratali-Adji Jumanov. More than 2000 pilgrims were not able to make the journey, even though they had paid in advance, because organizers sold seats in excess of Kyrgyzstan's Hajj quota. Most of those affected never received a refund. In addition, transportation arrangements -- by bus -- for those who did secure seats were a disaster, with some pilgrims stranded due to visa problems and bus breakdowns. In response to the complaints, Mufti Jumanov admitted there had been problems and dismissed deputy Mufti Nematulla Jeenbekov in February.

3. (SBU) Following this debacle, responsibility for managing this next Hajj was shifted to the State Agency for Religious Affairs (SARA). Poloff met with the SARA director, Jolbors Jorobekov, to discuss the upcoming Hajj and recent calls for him and the Mufti to be removed for reasons of corrupt

practices. Jorobekov reported that documents for the 4500 Kyrgyz pilgrims were in order, the Saudi Arabian Consul had arrived with visas for all participants, and that charter flights had been scheduled through several Kyrgyz airlines. "No longer will any of our citizens travel by bus and the debacle of last year's pilgrimage will not be repeated," said the director. Even though all pilgrims would fly to Mecca, the all-inclusive price of \$1500 per person would stay the same as last year, he said. Those who were cheated out of the trip last time would be "first on the list" this year, according to Jorobekov. He also confirmed that the division of slots for the Hajj would be approximately 3500 for the south (Osh, Jalalabad, Batken) and 1000 for the rest of the country. This division, he asserted, was carefully calculated by referencing pilgrimage data from previous years which showed a pattern of less than a thousand applicants from the north.

DIRECTOR DISMISSES ACCUSATIONS OF CORRUPTION

14. (C) Jorobekov explained the new division of responsibilities for this Hajj. He said that SARA would handle all logistics, safety, and security for the pilgrims, while the Muftiate (the official religious authority) was responsible for providing guidance on rituals, prayers, and general conduct during the pilgrimage. When asked about recent charges of corruption against the Mufti and Jorebekov for monopolizing the Hajj and turning a profit from the registration process, Jorobekov claimed that the public had been misinformed and private travel companies were behind the accusations. He argued that travel companies, hired to recruit pilgrims, were luring in would-be customers with advertisements claiming reduced prices (\$1300) for the trip to Mecca. When the pilgrims would show up to register, the

BISHKEK 00001795 002.2 OF 002

firms would charge the official rate with flimsy explanations regarding the discrepancy. The extra money, some alleged, was going into the pocket of Jorobekov, a charge that he adamantly denied.

REMOVE THE MUFTI IF YOU HAVE SOMEONE BETTER

15. (C) As for the calls for the Mufti's resignation following allegations of corruption, Jorobekov stated that he would support the removal of Maratali-Adji Jumanov if he felt that it would make a difference. However, swapping the Mufti, he believed, would do little to improve the situation. "Plus, none of these accusations have been backed up with hard evidence," said Jorobekov, "and without that, they will have little influence on the Council of Ulemas." (Note: The Council of Ulemas, a religious body consisting of thirty-one religious figures, maintains the authority to remove or appoint the Mufti. End note.) He said there are five groups of Muslim activists currently jockeying for power, each of which claimed to have a candidate for the Muftiate. Jorobekov felt that the perfect candidate should not only be well-versed in the Koran and other Islamic texts, but also speak fluent Arabic and English, as well as be familiar with the Internet. However, this "super Mufti", he argued, has yet to come forward.

COMMENT

16. (C) Although seemingly sincere in his comments, Jorobekov spoke like a polished politician. The former parliamentarian sought to distance his office from the Muftiate, as many fingers pointed at the Mufti's staff after the Hajj scandal last year. While he did not defend the Mufti, Jorobekov did discredit the accusations as being unsubstantiated. The director hoped for a problem-free Hajj this year, which would possibly quell the demands for his resignation from disgruntled groups in the Muslim community. END COMMENT.

